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ABSTRACT

The differences between early African American narratives written by women and those written by men can be seen in a comparison of Harriet A. Jacobs's "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself" and Frederick Douglass's "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave." A comparison of these works offers the greatest contrast of issues found throughout gender and autobiographical studies--issues of voice, content, ideology, and form. Douglass and Jacobs differ widely in voice, because of gender-related aspects of how voice is rendered, to whom it speaks, how much it is present, and how it is used to authenticate the speaker. Issues of ideology also surface as gender differences, both within the two texts and in the perception of them. The novelization of "Incidents" is only one element of contrast of form in the two texts. Despite their similarities--in shared themes of violence, sexual abuse, separation, religious irony, education, abolition, and demythification--the books' differences should call into question the perception of Douglass's "Narrative" as the peerless prototype of the genre. Scholars rethinking the African American literary canon may indeed need to consider that the "Narrative" finds its peer in "Incidents." Black women and black men underwent different experiences in slavery, perceived them differently, and wrote about them differently. Jacobs' achievement was the creation of a complex, contoured black woman and the depiction of her experiences in slavery. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

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Gender Issues and the Slave Narratives: Incidents in the Life and Narrative of the Life Compared

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The differences between early African American narratives written by women and those written by men may well begin with a brief comparison of Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl[,] Written by Herself (1861) and Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845). Though both are well-known, Douglass's work is often viewed as the prototype of the slave narrative genre (Olney 153; Baker, The Journey 32), while Jacobs's work expresses women's issues with a clarity that was shocking to her time (Yellin, "Texts and Contexts" 76). A comparison of Incidents in the Life and Narrative of the Life offers the greatest contrast of issues found throughout gender and autobiographical studies--issues of voice, content, ideology and form.

Robert Stepto has argued persuasively that voice is the most definitive feature of the slave narrative, and it is in this area that Douglass and Jacobs differ widely, due to gender-related aspects of how voice is rendered, who it speaks to, how much it is present, and how it is used to authenticate the speaker. In terms of how voice is rendered, and while both Douglass and Jacobs explicitly refuse to describe certain events, Jacobs's voice is cloaked under fictional names that allow her to depict, address and refer to characters (including herself) through the filter of a novelistic, first-person narrator, fictional names that also allow her to avoid direct self-disclosure. Whereas Douglass speaks in his own voice, with his own name and about named individuals, Jacobs speaks through a pseudonym and about individuals whose identities are coded. Jacobs's novelization of her text is revealed through her extensive use of dialogue and her greater attention to character development. For though Incidents is "the only slave narrative that deals primarily with the sexual exploitation of slave women" (Washington 3), Jacobs,

through her tone and by filtering her voice, reveals that she has adopted the censoring attitude of her contemporaries. Note one example. After his "battle with Mr. Covey" (113), Douglass is triumphant: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free" (113). Jacobs, however, reflects upon her triumphant defiance of Norcom with quite a different tone: "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame" (53). This is a shame that Douglass was not subject to. Even within the nominally coded voice construct of Linda Brent, Jacobs uses the suppressed voice expected of the women of her time. As Sidonie Smith asserts: "Often, projecting multiple readers with multiple sets of expectations, [the woman autobiographer] responds in a complex double-voicedness, a fragile heteroglossia of her own" (50-51).

In regards to whom the texts speak, both Douglass and Jacobs actively participated in the abolitionist movement and continue, in their works, to speak from the podium of the abolitionist circuit, though Jacobs's digressions from autobiographical content to philosophical and social commentary are often more noticeable and more didactic. Yet, there is one essential difference regarding to whom the respective works are directed. While one may wonder how important the female portion of his audience was to Douglass, Jacobs explicitly states that Incidents is written "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South..." (1). By the end of the work, Jacobs's use of language deliberately selects as the intended reader a young, white northern woman: a gender-related difference in audience that effects the

authorial pathos created in the work, as well as the voice of the work, which must arouse without offending this white female audience.

In regards to how much the author's voice is present in the text and how much it is muted and/or developed, Douglass speaks "with considerable ease" (151), in a voice so clear, forceful and consistent that the reader is never made to question its presence. Jacobs's voice, though, is filled with lacunae, particularly noticeable when one observes the muted sexuality and the muted anger that are conveyed --both gender-related issues. As Yellin points out, "passages presenting her [Jacobs's] sexual history...are full of omissions and circumlocutions" (Introduction xxi). One striking example is found in Jacobs's use of the third person to discusses Norcom's first sexual proposition: a conversation that she creates between Joseph and his brother Mark. Her words (which she would have known) are told in a vicarious manner through the words of Joseph to Mark (which she could not have directly known), and her anger toward and commentary on Norcom are projected through Joseph's mouth. It is noteworthy that she uses a male character in this initial reference to sexual advances, and that she mutes her own voice through novelized dialogue. When Jacobs does speak in her own voice (that of character Linda Brent) of Norcom's advances, her voice is also reticent--referring to rape in the softened term of "insult" and the broadened terms of "violence" and "death," and often leaving the first-person point of view and generalizing her condition. While Jacobs's sexuality is muted, Douglass's sexuality is not an issue; hence, it is not muted; rather it is plainly omitted. One finds that Jacobs depicts herself through the eyes of society--she is a sexual object. Though Douglass's masculinity is an essential part of his freedom, he is a sexual subject. A similar lacunae is evident in Jacobs's anger--

sometimes stated in the past tense but not expressed through direct quotation and sometimes posited as a question and diminished by an apologetic appeal to the reader. In the seventh chapter of the work, however, one glimpses the strength of Jacobs's voice and the tone of self-assurance and clarity that dominates Douglass's Narrative: "...you have no right to do as you like with me" (Jacobs 39). In the eleventh chapter, the reader cannot overlook the strong, newly emergent voice and the strong sense of self-identity conveyed. Interestingly, Jacobs's voice reveals more personal facets of the author, though it is more muted and more masked, while Douglass's forthright voice remains less muted but omits more personal details.

In regards to how successfully the voice is used to authenticate the speaker, using Stepto's paradigm, both Incidents and Narrative may be described as generic narratives in which "authenticating documents and strategies are totally subsumed by the tale" (181). Few critics disagree with Stepto's assertion that Douglass achieves authenticity (191), though the authenticating voice in Incidents is more a complex issue, even on the basic level of authorship, which was considered dubious until 1981 (Gates, Figures 144). The authenticating voice in Incidents is developed as Jacobs's voice develops, and by revealing the development of her voice within the text, Jacobs recreates and asserts the development of her own identity. Interestingly, Jacobs's self-authentication is ultimately tied to sexuality, and it is in describing how she assumes control of her sexual being that her voice develops its strength and authenticating power.

Content also plays a large part in determining the gender-related components of early African American narratives. The womanist content of Incidents is inextricable from the work. Jacobs describes the sexual plight of the woman slave; she argues that Black women who are

thus unprotected by law must be judged by a different moral paradigm (28, 56), and she depicts the Black woman's need to barter her sexuality as a means of self-control. Of the affair with Sawyer from which she expected the freedom of herself and her children, Jacobs says, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you..." (55). Strikingly, Jacobs also deals with the issue of abortion: "He intimated that if I had accepted his proposals, he, as a physician, could have saved me from exposure" (58). Underlying several of these issues are the woman-centered concerns of pregnancy and motherhood. To quote Claudia Tate: "The most emphatic expression in Incidents...involves Jacobs's incessant evocations of natural and divine law to affirm black women's rights to be respected as mothers" (109). Further, Jacobs's attention to her girlhood romance with a free Black, which may have been glossed without repercussions later in the plot of the text, was, to Jacobs, an important episode that merited inclusion. Similarly, Jacobs depicts the heroism of the Black woman, Black women-bonding and legal issues pertaining to the Black family. Jacobs also uses the recurrent image of breast-feeding, through which she metaphorically posits Black-white sisterhood and comments upon the entire institution of slavery. One must note how this image effects the pathos of the work; the reader is made to view the cruel behavior of the slaveholders as that of the ingratitude of a child toward its own mother.

This woman-centered content does not figure in Douglass's Narrative. Douglass's description of sexual aggression toward and physical abuse of slave women (49, 51-52, 105) merely combines with the abolitionist milieu of his work. His legal interests lie in the existence of slavery (91), the "Lynch law" (133), and so forth, and he

deems his young romantic involvement(s) unnecessary information for his Narrative, despite the fact that Anna Murray "had financially aided his escape" (Baker, Introduction 18). On the other hand, prevalent graphic detail and explicit depiction of brutality and physical battle (Baker, Long 76) are aspects of the language that reveal the male-centered mode of Douglass's text. What one finds is an irony of content. Jacobs presents her domestic and political life, her emotional, intellectual and sexual being, while Douglass presents himself as a political and intellectual personage. Ultimately, Incidents in the Life contains a more comprehensive narrative of the life of Harriet Jacobs, while Narrative of the Life contains more limited selections of the incidents in the life of Frederick Douglass.

Issues of ideology also surface as gender differences, both within the two texts and in the perception of them. For example, Jacobs defines personhood as control of her sexuality, of her motherhood and of her children, while Douglass, defines it in terms of manhood and control over his total destiny. Hence, Douglass's idea of freedom is an individual accomplishment, while Jacobs has a strong, family-oriented concept of freedom that is no less assertive. At the same time, the reader's perception of this ideology must undergo gender-related revision. The ideas of resistance and confrontation become critical. For Douglass, resistance is comprised of a strong angry voice, and confrontation most often takes the form of physical battle. With only the limited constraints of this male-centered viewpoint, however, the reader is bound to miss the rebellion that occurs in Incidents, in which resistance takes the form of skillfully evading sexual advances and in which confrontation is verbal. One must also overcome the idea of the hero as "the larger Promethean mythic identity that [Douglass] accrues to himself" (Andrews, To Tell 229).

Jacobs revises the concept of heroism by presenting as heroes the women who stayed amid slavery for the sake of their children, as well as those who struggled for and obtained freedom. Similarly, the idea of the physical cruelty of slavery that is explicitly described by Douglass is limiting when one approaches the multifaceted physical and psychological violence that is often gently conveyed by Jacobs (Andrews, To Tell 251). Again, unlike Douglass, Jacobs adds control of one's sexual being and control of one's children to the concept of womanhood and to the concept emasculation (itself a gender-related misnomer). In the case of gender-related ideology, the comparison of Incidents with Narrative reveals how such issues are conveyed in the respective works of women and men, as well as the need for the student to rethink traditional idea(l)s when approaching texts.

The final subject area of this study is form. The novelization of Incidents is only one element of contrast, and to this concept Andrews adds the importance of dialogue, asserting that "it is not a coincidence that the first autobiography written by a female slave in the United States contains more reconstructed dialogue than any male-authored narrative" ("Dialogue" 93). This dialogue, he asserts, often "pivot[s] on an argument over the slave woman's right to speak certain words in certain contexts" (To Tell 277). Interestingly, the story of Douglass's escape mirrors the sentimental novel by concluding with a surprise marriage, but the actual narrative continues, thereby subverting the sentimental novel convention. At the same time, Jacobs explicitly denies this sentimental-novel convention: "Reader, my story ends with freedom: not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (201). Douglass's Narrative is best compared to "biographical accounts of the lives of great men" (Baker, Introduction 13), didactic sermons (O'Meally 193), epic narratives,

adventure novels and Biblical narratives. Incidents is most directly influenced by Puritan confessional literature, the sentimental novel (Carby 47; Yellin xxi; Andrews, To Tell 268), and the seduction novel (Yellin xxx; Tate 109). Further, Tate notes the shift from sentimental to seduction novel techniques, thereby implicitly suggesting a necessary mutual influence of gender and genre in Jacobs's narrative. While Douglass speaks from the cult of male heroism, Jacobs speaks from the cult of "true womanhood." Gender issues, therefore, affect form as much as they influence voice, content and ideology.

Despite the similarities evident in Incidents and Narrative--the shared themes of violence, sexual abuse, separation, religious irony, education, abolition and demythification--their differences should cause us to question Houston Baker's perception of Douglass's Narrative as the peerless prototype of the genre or as "the most representative and superbly crafted" emancipatory narrative (Introduction 15), especially as it reflects only a subgroup of the slave experience and as it is told using only a selection of the devices at hand. Those rethinking the African American literary cannon may indeed need to consider that the Narrative finds its peer in Incidents, a text which blurs existing definitions through its wider inclusion of autobiographical detail and through its subversion of male-centered slave-narrative components. What is most clear is that Black women and Black men underwent different experiences in slavery, perceived them differently and wrote about them differently due to gender-related issues and that Jacobs's Incidents fills a gap in literary history by telling what male slave narratives do not tell. Jacobs's final achievement is absent from the works of Douglass and the other male slave narrators; it is the creation of a complex, contoured Black woman and the depiction of her experiences in slavery.

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